The Persistence of Conflict: Drug Cartels, Guerrillas, and Paramilitary Successors in Contemporary Colombia (2016–2025)

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I. Introduction: The Post-Conflict Paradox

The signing of the 2016 peace accord between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) marked the formal conclusion of a five-decade-long conflict, initially leading to a decline in generalized violence.[1] However, the cessation of hostilities with the FARC did not usher in a sustained era of peace; instead, the conflict underwent a fundamental transformation. Violence did not disappear but rather shifted in ownership and form, proliferating in remote areas previously dominated by the FARC. In many regions, the level of abuses against civilians has returned to the intensity observed immediately before the peace process.[1]

This post-conflict paradox is characterized by the vacuum of civilian and military state institutions in regions intended to receive the peace dividends of the accord.[3] In this environment of state absence, illicit economies, particularly drug trafficking and illegal mining, thrived, providing the necessary resources for new armed groups to proliferate and consolidate territorial control.[1] The contemporary conflict landscape is defined by competition among Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) exhibiting hybrid operational models: the persistent left-wing guerrilla force (the National Liberation Army, or ELN), the thoroughly criminalized paramilitary successors (the Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, AGC, also known as the Gulf Clan), and the ideological or criminally opportunistic splinter groups (FARC dissidents).[1]

The complexity of this security environment poses significant governance challenges, demanding a response that recognizes the convergence of sociopolitical insurgency and transnational organized crime. The strategic failure to effectively occupy former FARC territory and implement rural development policies created an environment ripe for horizontal conflict—the intensifying rivalry between remaining armed groups (ELN, AGC, FARC dissidents) for control of highly lucrative criminal rackets.[4] This dynamic, shifting the conflict from a vertical struggle between the state and a monolithic insurgency to a horizontal struggle among decentralized criminal actors, represents the core strategic challenge facing the government of President Gustavo Petro and his comprehensive "Total Peace" initiative.[6]

II. The Evolving Threat Landscape: Structure and Operations of Contemporary NSAGs

The security matrix in Colombia today is dominated by three primary categories of armed actors, all fueled by illegal economies and exhibiting sophisticated criminal-political capabilities.[1]

A. The Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC/Gulf Clan): A Paramilitary-Cartel Hybrid

The Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC), commonly known as the Gulf Clan (*Clan del Golfo*), emerged following the demobilization of the infamous United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) coalition between 2003 and 2006.[7] While the Colombian government has sometimes characterized these groups, and other successor organizations (

bandas criminales or BACRIM), as lacking a political doctrine, their roots and structure are clearly derived from the right-wing paramilitary tradition.[9] The AGC today represents Colombia's largest and most powerful drug cartel.[8]

The organization maintains a significant armed presence, with estimates ranging from the National Police figure of over 4,000 members to non-governmental estimates reaching as high as 10,200.[7] The AGC's operational focus is overwhelmingly criminal, concentrating on drug trafficking, illegal mining, and racketeering.[8] They have inherited the paramilitary strategy of widespread and serious abuses against civilians, including massacres, targeted killings, threats, and extortion, often targeting human rights defenders and victims seeking land recovery.[7] The AGC's capacity to destabilize large regions, particularly in Urabá and the Pacific coast, demonstrates that the demobilization of the AUC did not fundamentally alter the conditions of fear and violence experienced by local populations.[7]

B. The National Liberation Army (ELN): Expansion and Political Negotiation

The National Liberation Army (ELN), a left-wing guerrilla organization founded in the 1960s, is now considered Colombia's "largest remaining rebel group" and the country's primary NSAG threat following the FARC demobilization.[5] The ELN successfully leveraged the territorial vacuum left by the FARC, expanding its operational reach from 99 municipalities in 2016 to over 183 today.[12]

The ELN is actively engaged in arms trafficking, extortion, and illegal mining, utilizing its presence along the border with Venezuela as a critical logistical and strategic asset.[13] The ELN frequently clashes with rival armed groups, including the AGC and FARC dissidents, as they vie for control over arms and drug trafficking routes.[4] The group maintains a distinct political agenda, which complicates negotiations under the

Paz Total framework, as they demand political dialogue rather than the judicial submission offered to purely criminal groups.[14]

C. FARC Dissident Fragmentation: The EMC, Segunda Marquetalia, and the Battle for Criminal Routes

The 2016 FARC accord led to the immediate demobilization of the main insurgency, but over 30 fragmented "dissident" organizations quickly emerged, operating across approximately 85 counties.[1] These groups are broadly categorized into two main factions: the Estado Mayor Central (EMC), composed of groups that initially rejected the peace process, and the Segunda Marquetalia, formed by former top commanders who rearmed after signing the accord.[16]

The continued proliferation of these groups stems significantly from the state's sluggishness in executing post-2016 reforms. Failures in delivering rural development, economic opportunities, and security guarantees for former combatants created despair and vulnerability.[17] The lack of commitment to promised crop substitution policies meant that rural residents continued to rely on cocaine cultivation for income, readily joining dissident groups.[15] Furthermore, the murder of over 475 signatories to the 2016 agreement since its signing served as a powerful deterrent against demobilization, encouraging other former fighters to join dissident factions for protection.[3] The resulting environment is characterized by intense, localized, horizontal conflicts, such as clashes between rival dissident groups (e.g., Gentil Duarte and Segunda Marquetalia) over territorial control of drug routes in departments like Meta and Putumayo.[4]

D. Human Rights Impact: Abuses, Confinement, and the Crisis of Child Recruitment

The abuses committed by the AGC, ELN, and FARC dissidents continue to represent grave human rights concerns, especially for vulnerable populations such as Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities.[1] Reports of

child recruitment and **kidnappings increased in 2023**.[1] Children as young as eight are frequently coerced or enticed into joining these groups due to the lack of economic alternatives and the normalization of armed groups in territories saturated with illicit crops.[11] This recruitment crisis is intensified by the fact that many children live in areas dominated by armed groups and illegal economies, sometimes idealizing weapons and uniforms as symbols of social status and power.[18]

The operational methods of these NSAGs also lead to a humanitarian situation known as "confinement," where threats, antipersonnel landmines, and the hazards of crossfire prevent communities from leaving their settlements.[1] Between January and October 2023, approximately 64,000 people, predominantly Indigenous, were trapped in this state of confinement.[1] Violence persists through massacres, defined as the intentional killing of three or more civilians in a single incident, with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reporting 52 such events in the first half of 2023.[1] In regions like Nariño and Cauca, fighting among FARC dissident groups has displaced thousands, demonstrating that the primary measure of abuse is shifting from direct confrontations with the state to the internal dynamics of criminal control and the resulting displacement and targeted killings of community leaders.[1]

Major Non-State Armed Groups in Colombia (2024)

Group Name	Origin/Ideology	Primary Illicit Economy	Key Territorial Focus
Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC) / Gulf Clan	Successor to AUC (Right-wing neo-paramilitary)	Drug Trafficking, Illegal Mining, Extortion	Urabá, Pacific Coast, Northern borders [8]

Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)	Marxist-Leninist Guerrilla (Left-wing)	Extortion, Illegal Mining, Drug Trafficking	Border regions (Venezuela), Northeast Colombia [5]
FARC Dissidents - Estado Mayor Central (EMC)	FARC members who rejected the 2016 accord	Drug Trafficking, Illicit Crops (Taxes)	Cauca, Meta, Putumayo [4]
FARC Dissidents - Segunda Marquetalia	FARC commanders who rearmed	Drug Trafficking, International Arms Trade	Venezuelan border regions [4]

III. The Engine of Illicit Economies

The existence and operational strength of NSAGs in Colombia are fundamentally dependent on illicit financial flows (IFFs) derived from illegal economies. The current environment is characterized by an unprecedented convergence of narcotics revenue and high-value resource extraction, creating formidable obstacles to peace.

A. Cocaine Production: Mapping the Decade-Long Escalation and Current Trends

Colombia continues to face escalating coca cultivation and cocaine production, undermining any strategy centered on long-term conflict reduction. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the cultivation of coca bush reached 253,000 hectares in 2023, marking a 10% increase over the previous year.[20] More critically, potential cocaine production surged by 53% in 2023, reaching a potential 2,664 metric tons.[20] This statistic is particularly alarming as it represents the tenth consecutive year (since 2013) that potential production estimates have risen in the country, demonstrating a chronic failure to constrain the supply side of the global drug market.[20]

The expansion of coca crops is concentrated in highly dense, complex "cores," particularly along the Pacific coast, with Cauca and Chocó departments reporting new fields.[21] The rise in cultivation is closely linked to policy decisions, including the Constitutional Court’s prohibition

of aerial spraying of coca crops, and the failure of the government to rapidly implement crop substitution programs promised in the 2016 peace accord.[15] This overwhelming profitability creates an insurmountable economic disincentive for profit-driven groups like the AGC to genuinely submit to judicial disarmament frameworks, as the current illicit profit margins far outweigh any offer of leniency.

B. Gold, Deforestation, and Mercury: The Profiteering from Illegal Mining

Illegal mining, primarily of gold, has become a diversified and crucial revenue stream for Colombian NSAGs, matching or even exceeding the profitability of narcotics in some regions.[18] High global gold prices incentivize armed groups to expand their involvement in this sector, often integrating illegal mining operations into areas already used for coca cultivation.[22] This activity is associated not only with generating vast illicit wealth and money laundering but also with severe social and environmental costs, including mercury contamination, deforestation, and human trafficking.[22]

The environmental damage caused by illegal mining is staggering; experts estimate that the cost to repair the damage in Colombia alone would be nearly US$11 billion and require up to 40 years.[23] The involvement of armed groups in this sector illustrates their strategic move toward criminal resilience, diversifying their financial portfolio against traditional counter-narcotics efforts. By utilizing related activities like cattle ranching on illegally cleared land as fronts for money laundering, NSAGs increase their institutional capacity and become less vulnerable to single-focus military disruptions.[22]

C. Weaponry and Contraband: The Interplay of Arms and Goods Trafficking

The operational capability of NSAGs is maintained by a steady flow of illicit arms trafficked through transnational criminal networks. Weapons are procured in the United States and transported through Central America to Colombia via courier companies and cargo trucks, often with the assistance of local contacts within groups like the ELN.[24] These illicit supply lines also include weapons diverted from the Venezuelan army, demonstrating a level of regional cooperation and state complicity that sustains the conflict in Colombia.[24]

For groups like the AGC/BACRIM, the arms and logistical networks are inseparable from their core business: estimates suggest two-thirds of their forces are dedicated to guarding or transporting drugs and operating the associated drug laboratories.[25] The existence of dedicated arms brokers willing to sell weapons to rival groups during peacetime further ensures that the horizontal conflict between NSAGs remains highly lethal.[24]

D. Territorial Control: Illicit Governance in Areas of State Absence

The control over illicit economies translates directly into *de facto* governance in areas where the state is absent. Armed groups levy taxes on cocaine producers (BACRIM groups control over 75,000 coca-growing peasants), impose social regulations (e.g., FARC-EMC prohibiting deforestation in some areas), and utilize extortion to control local populations dependent on the informal economy.[22]

This illicit governance model is reinforced by the persistent threat of violence and coercion, including the imposition of "invisible borders" and curfews.[11] The NSAGs' success in maintaining this control is a function of the state's failure to deliver security and economic development, allowing these groups to function as parallel authorities, thereby cementing their long-term position regardless of negotiated peace frameworks.[3]

IV. Transnational Dimensions and Geopolitical Alliances

Colombian NSAGs are not isolated domestic threats but rather nodes in a global criminal network. Their stability is critically supported by alliances with foreign cartels and the protection offered by neighboring states, significantly limiting Bogotá's ability to exert full national security control.

A. The Cartel Nexus: Deepening Operational Ties with Mexican Organized Crime

Colombian drug trafficking rings are deeply integrated with powerful Mexican transnational

criminal organizations. The Gulf Clan (AGC) maintains strategic alliances with cartels such as the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG).[8] These alliances establish a sophisticated, globalized supply chain: Colombian groups specialize in high-volume production and export, while Mexican cartels manage transport, distribution, and control of the critical entry points into the lucrative North American market.[28] The professionalization required for these alliances confirms that many Colombian factions operate under a transnational organized crime paradigm, complicating peace dialogues designed for traditional political insurgents.

B. The European Connection: Trafficking Routes via West Africa and the Balkans

Colombian organized crime has successfully expanded its reach into Europe, establishing strong ties with major European criminal groups. The most notable partnership involves the Italian 'Ndrangheta, a powerful organized crime group, but connections also exist with the Serbian mafia and the Camorra.[8]

In response to increased surveillance on traditional routes, transnational organizations have multiplied their trafficking corridors. Eastern Europe and West Africa have emerged as key hubs, allowing traffickers to bypass direct routes to Western Europe.[30] Balkan criminal groups utilize port infrastructure in countries such as Albania and Montenegro to move large quantities of cocaine supplied by South American cartels.[30] This shift reflects a high degree of adaptability, resource-sharing, and sophistication, with criminals exploiting every flaw in the financial system to launder profits in legal industries like real estate and luxury trade.[30]

C. The Venezuelan Sanctuary: State Complicity, Safe Haven, and Border Conflict Dynamics

The sanctuary provided by the Maduro regime in Venezuela fundamentally shifts the strategic balance of power in favor of Colombian NSAGs. Venezuela remains a "permissive environment" and safe haven for U.S.-designated terrorist groups, including the ELN and FARC dissident factions such as Segunda Marquetalia.[16]

The ELN has exploited this environment most effectively, forming "symbiotic relationships" with elements of the Venezuelan state, including military and security officials, to facilitate and

protect illicit trafficking routes (drugs, human trafficking, and contraband).[16] Credible reports estimate the ELN's presence extends into 40 Venezuelan municipalities across eight states.[16] This state-backed protection means that NSAGs can retreat across the border, effectively placing them beyond the reach of sustained Colombian military pressure. This geopolitical reality provides Colombian armed groups with strategic depth, rendering purely military solutions impossible and making Petro's

Paz Total strategy vulnerable to external factors.[16] The entanglement between the Maduro regime and criminal elements, alongside documented ties to groups like Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran, has led to calls for designating Venezuela as a state sponsor of terrorism.[31]

D. Foreign Political Influence and International Counter-Narcotics Policy

Colombia has historically been a critical security partner for the United States, benefiting significantly from Plan Colombia since 2000, which focused on counter-narcotics and security force training.[32] While relations have experienced tension under the Petro administration, international cooperation remains vital. For instance, INTERPOL and transnational investigations have successfully cut off sources of arms supply to groups like the ELN, demonstrating the necessity of joint action against illicit arms trafficking networks that often procure weapons in the U.S. and route them through Central America.[24] International policy support, particularly for the implementation of the 2016 accord's transitional justice system (JEP), remains a necessary component for achieving sustained institutional progress.[3]

V. Deep Corruption: Infiltration of the Colombian Political System

The endemic political corruption in Colombia serves as a powerful enabling mechanism for NSAGs and cartels, allowing criminal structures to survive demobilization and maintain institutional impunity.

A. Historical Context: Drug Money in National Campaigns

Colombia has a long and documented history of illicit financing reaching the highest levels of political power. The infamous "Process 8000" scandal involved accusations that President Ernesto Samper's 1994 campaign was partially funded by drug money.[33] Although Samper was ultimately absolved, several close associates were convicted, establishing a precedent for the influence of narco-dollars in national politics. More recently, campaign financing scandals have persisted, involving alleged illegal financing of presidential campaigns related to the Odebrecht case, as well as the

Ñeñepolítica case involving allegations concerning Petro's 2018 campaign.[34]

B. Mechanisms of Infiltration: Local and Regional Political Control

Organized criminal groups wield immense power to corrupt the state apparatus, posing a serious risk not only to civilian institutions but also to the defense sector.[36] Paramilitary successor groups, such as the AGC, specifically employ political, social, and economic actions to negatively influence local and regional governance.[37]

The infiltration by paramilitary groups has been historically pervasive, extending into the judiciary, civil service, and political figures.[38] This deep co-optation of democratic institutions provides NSAGs with a crucial layer of institutional protection. By influencing local elections and co-opting officials, criminal groups can prevent the deployment of security forces, secure favorable regulatory environments for illegal mining, or, critically, stall the implementation of policies hostile to their operations, such as land reform or crop substitution.[17]

C. Illicit Financial Flows and Corruption Perception

Illicit financial flows (IFFs)—generated by drug trafficking, illegal mining, and grand corruption—flourish in countries marked by high levels of violence and expansive shadow economies.[39] This financial engine allows criminal actors to buy political access. Transparency International reports that political parties and the parliament are perceived by Colombian respondents as the most corrupt institutions in the country.[40] This widespread perception of political compromise further erodes public trust and legitimacy, creating a favorable

environment for NSAGs, who often portray themselves as alternative providers of order and justice in neglected areas.

D. The Failure of Accountability: Impunity and Collusion

Despite efforts, such as the Attorney General's Office reviewing over 100 cases of alleged collusion between paramilitaries and state officials [38], systemic impunity persists. The ability of groups like the AGC to maintain vast territorial control and financial power suggests that the deep-seated institutional corruption acts as a veto against lasting peace. If the state institutions required to implement judicial action, guarantee security, or deliver rural reform are compromised, any peace agreement remains fragile and vulnerable to recurrence, as observed in the failures to fully implement the 2016 accord.[3]

VI. The State Response: Analysis of Gustavo Petro's "Total Peace" (Paz Total)

Upon taking office in August 2022, President Gustavo Petro launched his flagship *Paz Total* (Total Peace) strategy, an ambitious and legally complex initiative aimed at ending decades of conflict through simultaneous, multi-track negotiations.[6]

A. Policy Foundations: Legalizing Negotiation with High-Impact Criminal Structures (Ley 227)

Paz Total was legally enshrined in Ley 227, passed by Congress in November 2022.[42] This law granted the government the explicit legal authority to advance dialogue and negotiations with the country's armed groups. The strategy is defined in the National Development Plan as a comprehensive "commitment" that utilizes all public policy decisions to promote territorial transformation, address economic and social rights deficits, and end armed violence, encompassing both socio-political and purely profit-driven conflicts.[14]

A key, novel element of *Paz Total* is the recognition that high-impact organized crime structures, such as the AGC/Gulf Clan, are relevant actors in the peacebuilding process, even

though they lack clear political ideology.[14] This perspective requires Petro's government to pursue two distinct legal tracks simultaneously: negotiating political deals with ideological rebel groups (like the ELN) and brokering judicial submission agreements with purely criminal organizations (BACRIM).

B. Objectives and Scope: Rural Reform, Land Policy, and the Shift from Forced Eradication

The core objective of *Paz Total* is not simply to achieve ceasefires but to reinforce the implementation of the stalled 2016 FARC accord while extending dialogue to all remaining armed criminal organizations.[42] Petro's approach seeks to tackle the historical structural causes of violence—the socio-economic conditions that reproduce conflict—by prioritizing deep reforms, including land redistribution and significant investments in rural infrastructure.[6] Furthermore, the policy introduced a paradigm shift in counter-narcotics, moving away from forced eradication of illicit crops, a policy that previously led to rural resentment and recruitment into NSAGs.[6]

For *Paz Total* to succeed, rapid delivery of these structural reforms is essential. The government has committed to substantial funding, including injecting $2.1 billion Colombian Pesos into the Colombia in Peace Fund.[42] Without swift improvements in security, economic opportunity, and state presence, the overwhelming economic pull of the cocaine trade will continue to sustain armed groups, negating any success at the negotiating table.

C. Key Processes: The Bilateral Ceasefires and Dialogues with ELN, EMC, and AGC

Petro's ambitious strategy involved "simultaneously juggling nine processes at once," including six with armed groups and three socio-legal dialogues with urban gangs.[12]

The most advanced negotiation is with the ELN, which resulted in a year-long ceasefire, the longest the group has ever agreed to since its formation.[6] This dialogue has been overseen by several guarantor countries and involves detailed protocols.[1] Negotiations were also initiated with FARC dissident factions, including the EMC, leading to bilateral ceasefires and the creation of temporary location zones (ZUTs) for demobilization efforts.[12]

However, the ambition of simultaneous talks created a critical challenge of coherence. By

blurring the line between ideologically driven insurgents (ELN) and high-impact criminals (AGC), the strategy faced immediate legal scrutiny. The Attorney General's Office, for example, questioned the legality of initial ceasefires with the Gulf Clan.[1] The AGC/Gulf Clan, remaining primarily interested in controlling criminal economies, has largely stayed outside the core peace initiative, preferring consolidation over submission.[44]

VII. Assessment of Paz Total Outcomes: Successes and Systemic Failures

After two years, Petro's *Paz Total* initiative has produced highly mixed results, demonstrating selective success in de-escalating government-group hostilities but systemic failure in halting inter-group conflict and protecting civilians.

A. Successes: De-escalation of Conflict with Security Forces and Transitional Justice Progress

A notable success of *Paz Total* has been the achievement of relative stability in the relationship between the state security forces and armed groups, contributing to a "plunge in hostilities" and restraining the escalation of political violence observed since 2019.[6] Initially, the peace talks generated significant momentum, prompting over 31,000 armed militants to come forward for negotiation and judicial arrangement.[43]

Furthermore, the government has provided crucial support for the transitional justice system established under the 2016 accord. The Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) is nearing the issuance of sentences under key Macro Cases, representing a significant institutional advance in delivering restorative justice to victims of the conflict.[3]

B. Failure of Negotiation: The Suspension of Talks and the Return to Hostilities

Despite the initial promise, dialogues have proven volatile and fragmented. In November 2023,

FARC dissident groups, including the EMC, pulled out of the peace talks.[15] The ELN negotiations remain precarious: the central command suspended dialogue in May 2024 after the government attempted regional negotiations with a splinter front.[12] Crucially, the ELN announced it had lifted its suspension on ransom kidnappings, a highly condemned move that erodes public trust.[45]

These breakdowns underscore a crucial dependency: the success of *Paz Total* hinges on the ability of the state to exert leverage. Military pressure is a critical part of negotiating with groups primarily interested in criminal profit.[46] When negotiations falter, groups default to exploiting violence for economic gain.

C. The Territorial Expansion Paradox: Armed Groups Utilizing Ceasefires for Consolidation

A critical analytical finding is that the reduction in conflict between state security forces and armed groups unintentionally fostered "territorial expansion and violent competition" among NSAGs themselves.[6] Rather than disarming, groups like the ELN and FARC dissidents utilized the stability afforded by ceasefires to tighten their grip on territories and increase their influence in new municipalities, transforming dialogue into an opportunity for consolidation.[12]

This paradox suggests a deep systemic failure: the policy inadvertently legitimized the NSAGs' *non-state governance* model. By signaling that their territorial control would not be militarily challenged, the state allowed groups to consolidate their administrative, coercive, and economic functions. Armed groups exploit the *Paz Total* initiative to continue practices of coercion, including child recruitment, sexual violence, and movement restrictions.[47]

D. Case Studies in Crisis: Persistent Violence in Catatumbo and Cauca

Despite the policy's stated goal, rural violence has persisted, demonstrating that the government mistook reduced hostilities with state forces for overall violence reduction.

The Catatumbo region experienced a severe humanitarian crisis in January 2025 due to violent clashes between competing armed groups, resulting in at least 55 civilian deaths and over 50,000 people forcibly displaced.[48] The crisis highlighted key gaps in security guarantees and implementation of the 2016 accord, disproportionately affecting Indigenous

and Afro-Colombian populations.[49]

Similarly, in Cauca and Nariño, fighting between rival FARC dissidents continues to inflict displacement, threats, and killings on local communities.[1] Nine years after the 2016 accord, only 34% of its commitments have been completed, confirming that the structural reforms necessary to deprive NSAGs of their recruitment base remain "moribund".[12]

Petro's "Total Peace" (Paz Total): Key Negotiation Status and Outcomes (2022–2025)

Negotiation Partner	Status	Successes/Positive Developments	Challenges/Failures
ELN	Ongoing/Volatile Dialogue	Longest ceasefire since 1964 achieved.[6] Dialogue overseen by guarantor countries.[41]	Suspension of dialogue, resumption of kidnappings.[45] Expanded territorial presence (99 to 183 municipalities).[12]
FARC Dissidents (EMC)	Highly Fragmented/Suspended	Initial ceasefires and temporary location zones (ZUTs) established.[12]	Groups pulled out of talks in late 2023.[15] Violent clashes between rival factions intensified.[4]
AGC/Gulf Clan (BACRIM)	Limited Judicial Engagement	Legal frameworks created for high-impact criminal structures.[14]	Remained largely outside the core peace initiative.[44] Continued widespread abuses and territorial consolidation.[1]
2016 FARC Accord Implementation	Moribund/Revival Attempt	Petro worked to reverse previous administration's delays.[12] JEP nearing first	Only 34% of commitments completed after nine years.[12] Rural development

		sentences.[3]	reforms stalled.[17]

VIII. Conclusion: The Path to Sustainable State Presence

The Colombian conflict today is a complex, hybrid struggle, driven by the unprecedented convergence of criminal profitability and territorial ambition among Non-State Armed Groups. The failure to rapidly implement the 2016 peace agreement's core provisions—rural reform and comprehensive state presence—created a strategic void that the AGC/Gulf Clan, ELN, and FARC dissidents have successfully exploited. These groups are sustained by record cocaine production and the high profitability of illegal mining, while simultaneously shielded by sophisticated transnational alliances with Mexican and European cartels and the strategic sanctuary provided by the Venezuelan regime.

President Petro's *Paz Total* strategy represents a necessary but profoundly risky attempt to resolve this entrenched violence. While achieving tactical successes in reducing state-group hostilities and advancing transitional justice, the policy has yet to secure strategic peace. The primary challenge is the "territorial expansion paradox," where ceasefires are utilized by armed groups to consolidate illicit economies and tighten their coercive grip on civilian populations. This risk is amplified by deep political corruption, which compromises the very state institutions necessary to implement the required socioeconomic transformations.

For the Colombian state and its international partners, future policy must acknowledge the fragmented nature of the adversary and adapt to the reality of illicit governance. This requires a shift from a collective, centralized approach to an inclusive, regional strategy that prioritizes local security and development.[15] International support must redouble focus on strengthening the justice sector, ensuring rapid, decentralized financing for rural development, and insisting on verifiable commitments from NSAGs to halt all forms of civilian coercion, particularly child recruitment and gender-based violence.[46] Ultimately, sustained peace requires the Colombian government to decisively project legitimate institutional control into the remote territories currently governed by the economics of crime and the rule of force.

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